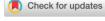## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Virtues are excellences

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Abstract

One of the few points of unquestioned agreement in virtue theory is that the virtues are supposed to be excellences. One way to understand this is to claim that the virtues always yield correct moral action and that we cannot be "too virtuous": the virtues cannot be had in excess or "to a fault". If we take this seriously, however, it yields the surprising conclusion that many traits which have been traditionally thought of as "virtues" fail to make the grade. The most prominent solution to the problem, reminiscent of Aristotle's view, is found to generate more problems than it solves.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle, cardinal virtues, virtue ethics, virtue theory, wisdom

Things worth having are the better and more desirable the more of them there is.

If justice is a good thing, no one will say that it is better with a bit taken off.

If courage is a good, no one will want it partly diminished.

Seneca, On Anger

The reemergence of virtue within the mainstream of moral philosophy and epistemology has led to a variety of theories about what virtue is per se and what the individual virtues are. Nevertheless, there are a small number of assumptions about virtue which are seemingly shared by all theorists and, perhaps if we attend to them carefully, a greater understanding of virtue will follow. For example, from Aristotle to Aquinas to contemporary times, it seems to be agreed by almost everyone that the virtues are character traits, the latter being understood today in psychological terms.[1] Linda Zagzebski gives us another, more substantive criterion by claiming that "[t]he central idea that virtue is

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[1]Following the psychologist Pervin (1994), we may understand a personality trait as "a disposition to behave expressing itself in consistent patterns of functioning across a range of situations" (p. 108), and we may follow Miller (2014, chapter 1) and normatively narrow the range of personality traits that will count as character traits. On such a view, character traits are those personality traits for which a person is responsible, and which open a person to normative assessment.

an excellence has never been seriously questioned" (1996, p. 85).[2] While all virtues, moral and epistemic, are excellences, here we will attend only to moral virtue. The present thesis is that if we really take the idea that *virtues are excellences* seriously, it will help us understand what moral virtue is and guide us in figuring out what the moral virtues are. The result of this is to see what makes the cardinal virtues special while leaving philosophers with the further task of explaining the status of all the other common "virtues".

The structure of the essay is as follows. We begin with the etymology of "virtue" and from there develop a standard account of *virtue* in which the virtues are excellences of character that ground moral normativity: right action is understood as virtuous action and a good person is a virtuous person. This is the most basic outline of virtue ethics. From this alone, it follows that there is no way to be too virtuous: one cannot possess a virtue in excess or "to a fault". Problems emerge because many, but not all, traits commonly called "virtues" can be had excessively, and it turns out that only the cardinal virtues cannot be had in excess. Most virtue theorists try to ameliorate the problem by taking a broadly Aristotelian view, developed most programmatically by Gary Watson. When pushed, however, this quickly leads to absurd results. If the goal of virtue ethics is to define "right action" and "good person" in terms of virtue, it must limit the virtues to those traits that cannot be overdeveloped or had in excess. If this is so, then the value of all the other commonsense "virtues" that can be overdeveloped will have to be derived from their relation to the cardinals. Finally, an explanation is given for why so many for so long have been confused about the moral status of many so-called "virtues".

Beginning etymologically, the English word "virtue" comes from the Latin, "*virtus*", which itself translates the Greek word "*arête*" (ἀρετή). "*Arête*", however, was used by the Greeks not just to name the virtues, but to name all "excellences", so that the word may apply to any context in which an item can be excellent in its area of use or operation: a rock may be an excellent doorstop and "the Jackal" may have been an excellent assassin. Morality is nowhere yet in sight; items which are quite bad or even evil may be "good" or "excellent" examples of their kind. While homing in on the moral virtues, we must cast a smaller net.

Since we think it is possible for there to be immoral excellences, like the Jackal's skill at assassination, the obvious suggestion is that the virtues are excellences with a positive moral valence. The positive valence of the moral virtues, in particular, is normative. Taking a nap under a shady tree may be excellent but it makes little sense, absent special pleading, to say that one ought to take a nap under a shady tree. It makes perfect sense to say that we ought to be virtuous. The moral virtues are excellences which we ought to (try to) develop and manifest; they are inherently praiseworthy and admirable, even aspirational.[3] As Rosalind Hursthouse says, "The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good; a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly, as she should—she gets things right. These seem [like] obvious truisms" (1999, p. 13). If the virtues are those character traits which it is excellent to have, we may proceed by asking ourselves what "excellent" means in this context and letting this inform our list of the virtues.

Now, while there is plenty of dissent from Aristotle on substantive issues below, we may nevertheless we begin with a basic "Aristotelian" framework for virtue, taken from Martha Nussbaum (1988):

> What [Aristotle] does, in each case, is to isolate a sphere of human experience that figures in more or less any human life, and in which more or less any human being will have to make some choices rather than others, and act in some way rather than some other. The introductory chapter enumerating the virtues and vices begins from an enumeration of these spheres (EN II.7); and each chapter on a virtue in the more detailed account that follows begins with "Concerning X...", or words to this

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[2]There maybe people who disagree, e.g., those who think the virtues are only instrumentally good. But this is surely revisionary of the original concept.

[3]For more on the aspirational sense of virtue, see Annas (2011). While the larger point about virtue and excellence is meant to be neutral across various theories of virtue ethics and various metaethical theories, it is obviously the sort of claim which Adams (2006) placed at the center of his account of virtue as excellence in being for the good, as evidenced by the title of his book, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good*.

effect, where "X" names a sphere of life with which all human beings regularly and more or less necessarily have dealings. Aristotle then asks, what is it to choose and respond well within that sphere? What is it, on the other hand, to choose defectively? The "thin account" of each virtue is that it is whatever it is to be stably disposed to act appropriately in that sphere. There may be, and usually are, various competing specifications of what acting well, in each case, in fact comes to. Aristotle goes on to defend in each case some concrete specification, producing, at the end, a full or "thick" definition of the virtue. (p. 35)

Cf. footnote 1 above, Pervin similarly claims all personality traits function "across a range of situations". And Christine Swanton also appeals to the idea of "the field of a virtue" in a book chapter called, "The Anatomy of Virtue" (2003, pp. 20–21).

For example, all humans encounter a dangerous world and feel fear, and we name "courage" to be the character trait which, when fully possessed, engenders in dangerous and fearful situations the right action, done in the right way, for the right reasons, and with the right feelings attached (*NE* 1106b21-24). The "thin" account of courage is that in that sphere of human experience, courage (or the principles or *logos* of courage) is "in charge" and determines the right action. This need not imply that no other virtue can be relevant to a person's deliberations on the battlefield, but only that courage is the final arbiter. Analogously, in the courtroom, justice is "in charge" and determines what ought to be done; when one is tempted, it is temperance.

Crucially, courage is in charge even in exceptional battlefield circumstances and justice commands the courtroom even in those situations where what normally ought not to happen ought to happen. We can see Aristotle's ideas in action in Book I of Plato's *Republic*, where it is agreed that a thin account of social morality is the virtue of *dikaiosunē*, or "justice" broadly construed, and Cephalus tries to give a thick account of it as "speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred" (Cooper, ed. 1997, 331c). Socrates famously replies that this would require returning what one borrows, but that if we borrow a sword from someone who asks for it back when he is out of his mind, it would be wrong and unjust to return the sword. Therefore, Cephalus' hypothesis fails for it would yield the intuitively wrong answer in exceptional circumstances.

In this example, we can also see one way in which virtues are excellences: echoing Hursthouse's truism, *per impossible*, if we imagine a perfectly virtuous person who always acts under complete information, that person would always perform the right action in the right way, for the right reasons, etc., *even in exceptional circumstances* in which one ought not to do what normally ought to be done. Thus, we can see one reason why virtue is often thought to be intrinsically good: virtues never go awry, their value is not contingent upon circumstance or context. This is why, necessarily, the virtues are excellences: they guarantee right action.

One implication of this is that character traits are not virtues if they give obviously wrong answers to questions about what one ought to do. Being selfish is not a virtue because, most of the time, it is wrong to be selfish, even if there are occasional circumstances in which a selfish act may be morally permissible. ("It's my party and I'll cry if I want to.") So, if there are character traits which it is good policy or a good "rule of thumb" to adopt, like returning what is borrowed, these will not count as virtues because in exceptional cases, following the policy is the wrong thing to do. This is why virtue ethicists, such as Hursthouse (1999), try to *define* "right action" in terms of virtue. If acting in accord with some particular virtue, in that virtue's "sphere of human experience", did not guarantee right action, there would be no reason to develop virtue ethics as a moral philosophy.[4]

We should be forewarned about two possible misinterpretations of these ideas. The first is to think that if an action is virtuous in any respect, it is right. If one accepted a strong "unity of virtues" thesis, such that a person could not have one virtue without having all of them, then perhaps any action which is virtuous in any respect

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[4]This is not to say that virtuous action is somehow guaranteed to not leave virtuous agents with what Michael Stocker (1990) calls "dirty hands", or somehow prevent having to act in what Hursthouse calls "tragic dilemmas" (1999, p. 35ff), where the best that can be done is to choose the lesser of evils.

would be right. But this strong form of the thesis is not implied by the conception of virtue ethics under consideration nor required by the arguments below. The second would be to think that it is impossible for a person with a virtue—any virtue—to perform a wrong act (under conditions of full knowledge, in compos mentis, etc). The point of Nussbaum's Aristotelian claim regarding a virtue's "sphere of experience" is that each virtue has its own field of action (to use Swanton's term), in which that particular virtue determines right action. Were I an otherwise just person who happens to also be a coward in battle, being just is not sufficient for me to perform the right battlefield action.[5]

A second facet of the logic of "excellence", not unrelated to how the virtues determine right action in exceptional circumstances, is that "being an excellence" entails that nothing can be "too excellent". Having more of a virtue is always better than having less (cf. the epigraph from Seneca). If moral excellence grounds right action, then it is impossible for something to be "too excellent". This is similar to how we think of *completion*: nothing can be "too complete", the phrase represents a misuse of language. Generically, if a property or a characteristic of an item has developed too strongly, too intensely, or becomes too deeply entrenched, such that this implies something *excessive*, then that characteristic is not an excellence. When muscle-bound men cannot scratch their own noses because their bicep muscles are too big, they have developed to a fault: their intention to make themselves stronger has undermined their ability to do what weaker people are able to do. So, one way to identify an excellence is that there is no such thing as there being too much of it. Note how aptly this captures how we speak (or do not speak) of paradigm virtues: if wisdom and courage are excellences, then it makes no sense to say of someone that he or she is "too wise" or "too courageous", for the excess implies something inapt, non-virtuous, or not excellent. Like a true compass, virtue takes its own measure; compasses and virtues cannot work too well.

This is consistent with the *ergon* arguments of both Plato (*Republic* 352d-354c) and Aristotle (*NE* 1097b21-1098a20): if some organ or trait has a proper function, then it makes no sense to say that it can function "too well". The flip side of this is that if a character trait is an excellence, then it cannot be over-developed. The virtues each have their proper function: the proper function of courage is to engage with danger and fear excellently; for justice, it is to navigate excellently our social relations; for temperance, it is to self-regulate our appetites, desires, and emotions excellently; for wisdom, it is to discern value in the world generally and act in accord with it in particular cases in an excellent fashion. None of these can be performed "to a fault", none of them can be possessed in excess. Unlike a muscle-bound man's muscles, a person's eyes cannot function too well, one's hearing cannot be too acute, and one cannot be too virtuous.

We should be careful not to confuse the excesses involved in "the doctrine of the mean" with the excesses of excellence which are the present concern (*NE* 1107a6-8.). There is common courage that answers to the call of duty and there is the supererogatory courage of the hero, and the latter exceeds the former. On this scale, one cannot be too heroically courageous and the difference between common and supererogatory courage has nothing to do with recklessness, even though the latter is sometimes thought of as an "excess" of the qualities which make a person courageous. Notice that the "excesses" of recklessness can equally be seen as deficiencies: excessive fearlessness is a deficiency of caution, excessive confidence is a deficiency of humility, etc. The "excessive" qualities which heroes have cannot be seen as deficiencies in a similar manner. This is why it makes no sense to say that a person is "courageous to a fault" or "wise to a fault". It is likely that that the conflation of these two senses of "excess" has contributed to the philosophical confusions at hand.

So, we have found two criteria for excellence and thereby for virtue: (i) moral excellences of character ground correct action and (ii) no excellence can be had in excess. The link between these is that when some character traits are over developed, they sometimes yield wrong action. One reason that virtue always yields right action is because there is no such thing as being too virtuous.

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[5]Another way this point could be made is to emphasize that "virtue" as a mass noun plays no substantive role in virtue ethics, and that all uses of "virtue" pick out particular virtues.

What is the upshot of these considerations? It is that traits which can lead to wrong action or admit of an excess should not be considered as excellences or virtues. And this implies that a great many of the character traits which commonsense traditionally calls "virtues" do not make the grade. As noted above, the cardinal virtues (courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom) all meet the relevant standard as none of them can be had to an excessive degree or "to a fault". On the other hand, traits commonly counted as "non-cardinal virtues", such as honesty, generosity, humility, loyalty, patience, and kindness can all be possessed in excess or developed to an excessive degree. It is easy to come up with situations which show people being too honest, too generous, too humble, etc. If the virtues, in theory, cannot lead us astray, if they are always to be our source of normative guidance, then we have strong prima facie reasons to reconsider the standing of many traits as "virtues" since always being strictly honest, generous, humble, etc., will lead to moral error, while steadfast virtue can never lead one astray. The surprising conclusion, perhaps shocking, is that if we take seriously the thesis that "virtues are excellences", which Zagzebski claims is unquestioned, then traits such as honesty, generosity, humility, etc., should not count as virtues.[6]

In the contemporary literature on virtue ethics, there has been a small amount of attention given to this problem, and all point to similar solutions. Hursthouse (1999) spends two paragraphs on the problem, immediately after giving the "truisms about virtue" which were quoted above, and we return to her below. James Wallace's (1978, pp. 141–143) early book on virtue contains a short discussion of the issue, regarding generosity, benevolence, and excessive concern for others, and gestures toward a programmatic, Aristotelian solution which is developed more fully by Watson (1984) in his paper "Virtues in Excess". Even in Watson's paper, however, the discussion of "virtues in excess" is less than two pages long and really only serves as an introduction for him to a larger argument defending a version of the "unity of virtues" thesis.

Watson distinguishes a "straight" view of virtue from what he calls the "due concern" view. The straight view is the one which has been under consideration so far: the virtues are excellences of which we cannot have too much; the more, the better. Watson rejects the view because he says it leads to an "absurdity":

> [W]e would have to say that those with excessive generosity are morally better...than those whose generosity is not excessive. For on the straight view, they have this virtue to a higher degree, and consequently ought to be more virtuous in this respect. (1984, p. 58)

Watson does not consider, however, the idea that this absurdity should lead us to a modus tollens instead of a modus ponens, the former implying a rejection of the traditional idea that generosity is a virtue. Instead, Watson's modus ponens solution is that:

> The *due concern view* construes a virtue as a characteristic readiness to feel, desire, deliberate, choose, and act well in certain respects. So construed, virtues cannot be excessive and cannot themselves lead to bad action. (1984, pp. 58–59)

On the due concern view, the constraint that virtues cannot be excessive is respected by defining "honesty" as having a due concern for truth-telling, "benevolence" is having a due concern for helping others, etc., and even the cardinal virtues are rendered in this way by Watson, even though he acknowledges they are compatible with the straight view. With the due concern view, the normativity, one might say, is built into the "due concern" and not into the trait per se. He closes his discussion by identifying the due concern view with its "ancient roots", referencing Aristotle.

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[6]One possible explanation of the difference between the cardinal and non-cardinal virtues is that the non-cardinal virtues (all?) name particular types of behavior—honesty, generosity, patience, etc.—while the cardinal virtues do not: there is no single type of behavior determined by courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom. So, the "virtues in excess" problem arises for non-cardinal "virtues" because there is no single type of behavior which is always right, regardless of the field of action which is involved.

Of course, Aristotle and Aquinas were aware of the conceptual problems attending an excess of virtue. While we will take up Aquinas' response below, a plausible reading of Aristotle has him locating what we would call today "normative guidance" not in the various virtues, but in practical wisdom (*phronesis*) which is integrated, in one way or another, into each of the virtues, as "due concern" is for Watson. Aristotle (Crisp, trans. 2004) writes:

> Virtue, then, is a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason – the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it. (1106b36-1107a2)

To begin comment: on this view, honesty is not honesty, so to speak, unless it is guided by practical wisdom. This implies that practical wisdom is necessary for all virtues, which is by itself unproblematic, but there are two problems facing Watson's view which are equally troubling for Aristotle.[7] The first is that it yields absurd judgments about certain actions, and the second is that it can be used to turn a huge number of traits, basically any trait which occasionally yields right action, into virtues, including some traits normally considered vices. Either problem is serious on its own, but together they show how unsatisfactory the "due concern" view is as a solution to the problem of "virtues in excess".[8]

The first problem begins by considering, as Nussbaum called it, the "sphere of human experience", such that, within that sphere, right action is determined by that virtue. Taking courage as a first example, when danger is present, the morally correct action is called "the courageous action", regardless of circumstance or whether we normally think the type of action prescribed is courageous or not. For instance, in battle, we typically think that the courageous thing to do is charge forward and to not retreat. Nevertheless, there are exceptional cases in which the courageous thing to do is to enact an orderly retreat or even to stand down and accept one's fate with equanimity.[9] Courage is what determines whether charging forward or retreating is the correct thing to do and it never goes wrong. Similarly, justice determines that in the exceptionally unjust circumstances of Sherwood Forest, it is just for Robin Hood to steal from the rich to give to the poor, despite the fact that stealing is normally unjust. Similar conclusions follow for the other virtues: even in the most extreme or unusual circumstances, the virtue managing the relevant "field of action" determines right action in that situation. Again, this is what makes virtues excellences.

Compare this to how arguing along the same lines would work for honesty, generosity, or humility. If we were to treat honesty as a virtue, then presumably the field of action in which honesty operates is the one in which truth-telling or testimony is at stake. But now, consider those exceptional circumstances in which the morally correct action is to be dishonest and tell a lie: the Nazis are at the door looking for partisans, etc. If we operate with honesty along the same principles by which we understood courage, then we ought to conclude that when the Nazis are at the door the honest thing to do is be dishonest and tell a lie, just as the courageous thing to do in certain circumstances is to retreat. But it is plainly absurd to say that "honesty prescribes dishonesty", or that "the honest thing to do is to tell a lie" in a way that it is not absurd to say that "courage prescribes retreating or accepting one's fate with resignation". The proper conclusion is that, in this exceptional circumstance, the right thing to do is be dishonest, and being honest is the wrong thing to do.

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[7] For a defense of the view that wisdom is necessary but not sufficient for virtue, see Bloomfield (2014).

[8] The problem of "virtues in excess" is related to but distinct from what Russell (2009) calls "the enumeration problem", which concerns a possible yet theoretically unfortunate explosion in the number of virtues. As we will see below, one implication of accepting the "due concern" view is that it leads to the enumeration problem. Russell's linked discussion of cardinality is also addressed below.

[9] Famously, in *Crito*, Socrates accepts his fate with courage and equanimity. One may wonder what retreating courageously might look like. In Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades describes Socrates retreating alongside Laches at the battle at Delium. Socrates, ever self-possessed, retreated by walking along with his head held high, on the lookout for both friends and foe. Alcibiades says:

Anyone could tell, even from a distance, that here was a man who would resist an attack with considerable determination. And that's why he and Laches got out of there safely, because the enemy generally don't take on someone who can remain calm during combat; they prefer to go after people who are in headlong flight. (Waterfield, trans. 1994, p. 221a–c)

In exceptional circumstances, courageous people may have to retreat and just people may have to steal, and this, one may think, is analogous to an honest person having to tell a lie. The problem is that, as noted above, people in general can retreat courageously or recklessly or in a cowardly fashion, and of course courageous people retreat courageously. It is impossible, on the other hand, to be dishonest honestly. The due concern view generates results which are the opposite of what they should be: the phrase "dishonesty can be honest" sounds more like Orwellian Newspeak than colloquialisms like "discretion is the better part of valor" or something from Seneca or Cicero. We simply cannot treat honesty the way we treat courage and justice.

Here is the problem rendered as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Calling the range of situations involving truth-telling or testimony, "T-situations", we may say:

1. Honesty is the virtue responsible for acting correctly in T-situations.
2. In any T-situation, the honest thing to do is the right thing to do.
3. When the Nazis are at the door, it is a T-situation.
4. The right to do in this T-situation is be dishonest.
5. So, when the Nazis are at the door, (from 2) the honest thing to do is to be dishonest (from 4). (Reductio)

Similar results can be obtained for generosity, humility, patience, and the rest. Consider generosity: when giving in the past has backfired and giving a third time is the wrong thing to do, then we would have to conclude that "the generous action is to refuse to give". Or consider humility: when oppressed people need to stand up and speak truth to power, we would have to say, "the humble action is to assert oneself and insist on one's moral rectitude".[10] With regard to patience, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964) writes:

> There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

We do not say, in such circumstances, "the patient thing to do is be impatient." We never speak in such absurd ways and the "due concern" view is at a loss to explain these absurdities.[11]

Hursthouse recognizes the problem, immediately after she gives the quote above about the "truisms" regarding virtue. She responds as follows:

> As far as my own linguistic intuitions go, the only virtue term we have which is guaranteed to operate as a virtue term—that is, to pick out something that always makes its possessor good—is "wisdom". (Perhaps also "just"—I am not certain.) People can be "too clever by half" but not too wise. But all the other candidates seem to accept "too" or "what a pity he is so…". However, we do not have to talk this way, and we have various circumlocutions that enable us to hang on to the truisms that a virtue is a good way to be; that it makes its possessor good and enables her to act well. We can make sense of the claim that it is impossible to be too generous or too honest. Someone initially described that way can be redescribed as not quite having the virtue of generosity but a misguided form of it, as not so much honest as candid or outspoken. Instead of saying, without qualification, that someone's benevolence led them to act wrongly on a particular occasion, we might say, again, that they had, not the virtue, but a misguided form of it, or (depending on the nature of the case)

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[10]For more on humility along these lines, see Bloomfield (2021).

[11]Miller (2017) seems to open to not seeing this as an absurd result regarding honesty. Because he thinks that there could be causes where it is compatible with honesty to "distort the facts", he hypothesizes that honesty may be "concerned with reliably not distorting the facts unless it is morally appropriate to do so" (p. 244). He does not, however, address the entailment of this hypothesis which is that "lying or being dishonest can be the honest thing to do". Put in such bald yet undeniable terms, the hypothesis is apparently reduced to absurdity.

a perverted form of it, or that they were on the right path but did not possess the virtue yet, or possessed it to a very imperfect degree. (1999, pp. 13–14)

Unfortunately, this will not do. First, we can no more correctly speak of too much courage, justice, and temperance than we can of too much wisdom (assuming we keep in mind the two forms of "excess" mentioned above, where Aristotle (*NE* 1107a6-8) was referenced): no hero can be too courageous, no judge can be too just, no one self-regulating in an excellent fashion can be too temperate. As noted above, Watson concedes this. Furthermore, Hursthouse's circumlocutions beg the relevant question. Insofar as Hursthouse's claim about "perverted" forms of virtue is different than Watson's "due concern" view, both are nevertheless merely acknowledgments of the initial problem: the person's honesty or generosity is "perverted" if it is excessive.

One might try to explain the problem as the result of a conflict between the virtues. This seems to be the strategy Foot (1985) adopts.[12] According to her what is happening in cases like those where one ought to be dishonest to Nazis or when one ought not to be generous is that some other virtue is taking precedence or outweighing the virtue of honesty or generosity, and that is why the results appear to have an odd aspect. Perhaps honesty and generosity themselves only give prima facie prescriptions on their own, but things might appear differently from an all-things-considered point of view.[13] When virtues conflict, one might end up correctly doing what is normally wrong. So, compassion for the partisans overrides the obligation of honesty one otherwise would have to the Nazis(?), or prudence overrides generosity when one ought not, for whatever reason, to give.

The problem with thinking that each virtue only gives prima facie reasons is that this would require a much deeper change in the structure of virtue ethics as a whole. The Aristotelian structure of virtue theory began by appealing to the idea that there are types of situations which are endemic to the human condition and, for each type, there is a particular virtue which determines "right action" in that type of situation. If each of the virtues only gave prima facie reasons, then there would be no way to develop a theory capable of generating prescriptions for behavior as ethical theories must: if each virtue only gave preliminary guidance, then "right action" would always be determined by wisdom alone, as it would always have the job of adjudicating all the prima facie reasons generated by the individual virtues. If this were the case, then all talk about individual virtues would become misleading for they would *never* genuinely be action-guiding in themselves: *all* the normative, action-guiding work would always be done by wisdom. While such a view might be theoretically possible, it would imply a wholesale restructuring of virtue ethics. What allows virtue ethics to be action-guiding, as it has historically been developed, is its ability to specify certain virtues which determine right action for certain kinds of situation, and this happens through the idea of a "sphere of human experience".

The idea of a "sphere of action" for a virtue is needed because different aspects of human life are best managed or regulated by certain traits and not others. We have been understanding honesty to be the virtue whose sphere of action is truth-telling or testimony, so that when we are in that sphere, the morally right thing to do is supposed to be determined by the virtue of honesty. Honesty is "in charge" there, so to speak. Similar remarks apply for when the virtue of generosity is in charge. And same with courage: in dangerous circumstances, courage is in command. So, it seems theoretically inapt to find compassion overriding honesty when truth-telling is at stake and prudence overriding courage on the battlefield. Of course, courageous people give due weight to prudence and caution in their decision-making, otherwise they would be reckless, but something has gone wrong if the implication is that courageous people are otherwise reckless people who let prudence or wisdom hold them back when necessary. That would not be a view of courage at all. It is much more natural to say that the courageous people charge forward or retreat, given what the circumstances happen to be, but they are always being courageous. The same does not hold for honesty: again, one can courageously retreat but one cannot honestly tell a lie.

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[12]For more general discussion on the question of whether virtues can conflict, see Irwin (2005a).

[13]Miller (2017) suggests this.

Moving on, the second problem for the due concern view is that it makes it possible to turn almost any character trait into a virtue and even turn a vice into a virtue. Any trait which, at least on occasion, yields a correct prescription for action and for which we might have a due concern, may be considered a virtue. "Due concern" alone ends up being an extraordinarily low bar for virtue theory, for we can have due concern for just about anything. For instance, I can have a due concern for recycling, so being a recycler would become a virtue. Going back to the quote from Aristotle above, practical wisdom determines the rational choice of a virtuous agent. So, given the occasional correctness of being dishonest (Nazis at the door, etc.), and the absurdity of thinking that the honest thing to do is be dishonest, the implication seems to be this: when it is right to be honest, honesty is virtuous, but when it is not, it is not, and wisdom tells us when being honest is virtuous and when it is not. If so, then in those circumstances when it is correct to be dishonest, it is wisdom which tells us that being dishonest is correct and therefore the virtuous thing to do. So, there are some circumstances in which being honest is virtuous and others in which being dishonest is virtuous. From the viewpoint of the "due concern" view, the only difference between the "virtues" of honesty and dishonesty seems to be the frequency with which they yield virtuous prescriptions, honesty being common and dishonesty being less common. If dishonesty is occasionally virtuous, then it sounds like we should conclude that, "honesty is the best policy". But policies cannot be virtues, so, something has clearly gone wrong.

To generalize the claim, it seems that on the "due concern" view, any trait Φ could be taken to be a virtue if there are times when φ-ing shows a due concern for Φ-ing. But just because there are times when it is virtuous to act in a certain way, this does not imply that this way of acting is itself a virtue. If there is a general criticism of virtue theory that it allows for too great a proliferation of traits to be called "virtues" (cf. note 8 on Russell), the due concern view is likely to be the cause of it. In fact, it seems like the only justification for the due concern view is that it works as an ex post facto fix to keep traits like honest and generosity from being ruled out as virtues because they can lead to morally wrong action. Otherwise, the due concern view is unmotivated and, as argued, problematic. And crucially, the cardinal virtues need no such "fix", Watson's "straight view" works fine for them.

Given the above, it seems undeniable that there is an important distinction between, on the one hand, the cardinal virtues, which are "excellences" in the sense elaborated above and, on the other hand, all the other supposed "virtues" which rely on something akin to the "due concern" view to get in the game. One way forward comes from Aquinas who distinguished between the cardinal virtues and the rest, where the latter may be thought of as "auxiliary" virtues.

Aquinas (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans.1947) writes:

> any virtue that causes good in reason's act of consideration, may be called prudence; every virtue that causes the good of right and due in operation, be called justice; every virtue that curbs and represses the passions, be called temperance; and every virtue that strengthens the mind against any passions whatever, be called fortitude. Many, both holy doctors, as also philosophers, speak about these virtues in this sense: and in this way the other virtues are contained under them (1a2ae61, article 3; see also the rest of question 61 and 65).

So, for example honesty and humility would be auxiliaries of justice, endurance would be an auxiliary of courage, and patience would be an auxiliary of temperance.[14] In fact, this is exactly how Hursthouse (2006) glosses Aristotle's discussion of the relation of *euboulia* (good deliberation), *sunesis* (comprehension), and *gnōmē* (discernment) to practical *nous*.

In this way, honesty, humility, endurance, and patience, might still be considered virtues, but it would be acknowledged, at least at the level of theory and perhaps even as these traits are inculcated, that they work differently than the cardinals: one cannot simply act as if being honest is always correct in the same way that being just

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[14]For a development of Aquinas' thought, see Oderberg (1999).

is always correct; one's goal ought not to become as honest as possible. If such a view were adopted, however, much of the contemporary literature on virtue ethics would need a substantial revision to accommodate the ways that the auxiliary virtues are structured by the cardinal virtues. For example, all discussions of honesty and humility would be radically incomplete without discussion of how they are related to justice.[15]

Daniel Russell gives a model for the logical relation which would obtain between a cardinal virtue and an auxiliary virtue in terms of a "conversational shift" that would occur, from auxiliary to cardinal when someone gives reasons for why they performed an action in accord with an auxiliary virtue. So, if someone does something honest and is asked why, the immediate reasons will involve characteristic reasons of honesty, such as the value of truth-telling and integrity, and if the person is pressed for further reasons for why these are important, they will end up giving reasons characteristic of justice, such as mutual respect, which shows how honesty is an auxiliary of justice. Russell uses the Stoic terminology of an "exercise" of virtue, such that acting from an auxiliary virtue is ipso facto also an exercise of a cardinal virtue. He writes:

> In general, then, to say that X is a cardinal virtue and Y is an exercise of X is to say that the model of the Y person exhibits ascension under conversational shift from the reasons characteristic of Y to the reasons characteristic of X, and the model of the X person exhibits ascension from reasons characteristic of X to reasons rationalizing all of the virtues simply qua virtues. (2009, p. 198)[16]

This would preserve the relevant non-cardinal character traits as a kind of "second-class" virtue. The problem with this is that it rejects the idea that "virtues are excellences": on this view, only virtue qua virtue, i.e. wisdom, ends up being excellent.

Another way forward is simply to follow the argument from above, though the results are more startling: this is to conclude that traits such as honesty and generosity should not count as "virtues" at all. This is to conclude that traits are not virtues if they yield incorrect prescriptions in exceptional circumstances. While not put in these terms, this is the view which seems to have been adopted by Socrates and the Stoics, and to some extent Plato (Irwin, 2005b). (Recall from above Socrates' rejection in *Republic* of understanding "justice" in terms of "returning what is borrowed".) The conclusion, shocking to contemporary ears, is that the *only* virtues are the cardinal virtues, as these are the only traits which cannot be developed to excess and, in terms of which, we can define "right action". This is to conclude that, contra a commonsense or folk theory of virtue, honesty, generosity, and patience, etc., are not virtues.

Perhaps we should not be surprised to find commonsense (*endoxia*) confused about whether honesty is a virtue or, rather, whether it is "the best policy", or whether profligate generosity counts as "generosity". The issues here require us to theorize about virtue just to frame the questions correctly. And the folk are often confused about the cardinal virtues as well. Of course, we cannot count on the folk to help us understand wisdom, since genuine wisdom—beyond the platitudes of "folk wisdom"—requires subtlety and perspicacity exactly when and where the folk are not. Were this not the case, wisdom, and virtue more generally, would be commonplace and not honored and valued as they are. Still, we give medals for bravery to those who are truly courageous and also to those who are reckless but lucky, and the folk (including military leaders) do not discriminate between these. The prohibition-era, folk-led "Temperance Movement" in the United States conflated temperance with abstinence, which is as preposterous as conflating courage with recklessness. (If it is somewhat understandable to confuse [recklessness + luck] for courage, it is preposterous to not even

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[15] For more on the relation of humility to justice see Bloomfield (2021).

[16] Russell understands cardinality in the purely formal terms given here. He understands virtue generally in terms similar to the "due concern" view, and he explicitly accepts that there can be "chains" of cardinality, where A is an exercise of B, and B is an exercise of C, etc. This is to reject the naturalistic, Socratic/Stoic understanding of the cardinals as those virtues which are, to use Irwin's (2005b) words, "those that secure the happiness of the individual, in so far as this is up to the individual" (p. 90). (Irwin's use of the phrase "in so far" here is a hedge against the idea that the virtues may not be sufficient for happiness.).

distinguish recklessness from courage.) The folk are often good at spotting blatant unfairness and injustice, and can spot how Robin Hood's case is exceptional, but they are also inclined to fall under the spell of demagogues who simply tell them what they want to hear, or they sometimes accept the crude "justice" of mobmentality as exemplified in lynchings and riots (see Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014). Given that the folk are frequently unreliable judges of virtue, expertise will be required to sort the matters out and, as stated, theory is needed. We should not expect more of folk virtue ethics than we do of folk physics: both succeed in demarcating an area of study and make forays to understand it, but both are prone to containing basic mistakes, and neither gets close to discerning the deepest truths of their subject matters. Philosophy and mature virtue ethics must do better.

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